

# OVERTURES TO DEATH

and Other Poems

BY  
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*To*

*E. M. FORSTER*



# OVERTURES TO DEATH





# Maple and Sumach.

Maple and sumach down this autumn ride –  
Look, in what scarlet character they speak!  
For this their russet and rejoicing week  
Trees spend a year of sunsets on their pride.  
Your leaves drenched with the lifeblood of the year.  
What flamingo dawns have wavered from the east,  
What eves have crimsoned to their toppling crest  
To give the fame and transience that you wear!  
Leaf-low he shall lie soon: but no such blaze  
Briefly can cheer man's ashen, harsh decline;  
His fall is short of pride, he bleeds within  
And paler creeps to the dead end of his days.  
O light's abandon and the fire-crest sky  
Speak in me now for all who are to die!

# February 1936

Infirm and grey  
This leaden-hearted day  
Drags its lank hours, wishing itself away.

Grey as the skin  
Of long-imprisoned men  
The sky, and holds a poisoned thought within.

Whether to die,  
Or live beneath fear's eye –  
Heavily hangs the sentence of this sky.

The unshed tears  
Of frost on boughs and briers  
Gathering wait discharge like our swoln fears.

Servant and host  
Of this fog-bitter frost,  
A carrion-crow flaps, shadowing the lost.

Now to the fire  
From killing fells we bear  
This new-born lamb, our premature desire.

We cannot meet  
Our children's mirth, at night  
Who dream their blood upon a darkening street.

Stay away, Spring!  
Since death is on the wing  
To blast our seed and poison every thing.

# Bombers

Through the vague morning, the heart preoccupied,  
A deep in air buried grain of sound  
Starts and grows, as yet unwarning –  
The tremor of baited deepsea line.

Swells the seed, and now tight sound-buds  
Vibrate, upholding their paeon flowers  
To the sun. There are bees in sky-bells droning,  
Flares of crimson at the heart unfold.

Children look up, and the elms spring-garlanded  
Tossing their heads and marked for the axe.  
Gallant or woebegone, alike unlucky –  
Earth shakes beneath us: we imagine loss.

Black as vermin, crawling in echelon  
Beneath the cloud-floor, the bombers come:  
• The heavy angels, carrying harm in  
Their wombs that ache to be rid of death.

This is the seed that grows for ruin,  
The iron embryo conceived in fear.  
Soon or late its need must be answered  
In fear delivered and screeching fire.

Choose between your child and this fatal embryo.  
Shall your guilt bear arms, and the children you want  
Be condemned to die by the powers you paid for  
And haunt the houses you never built?

# A Parting Shot

He said, 'Do not point your gun  
At the dove in the judas tree:  
It might go off, you see'

So I fired, and the tree came down –  
Limed leaf, branch and stock,  
And the fantail swerving flew  
Up like a shuttlecock  
Released into the blue.

And he said, 'I told you so'.

# Newsreel

Enter the dream-house, brothers and sisters, leaving  
Your debts asleep, your history at the door:  
This is the home for heroes, and this loving  
Darkness a fur you can afford.

Fish in their tank electrically heated  
Nose without envy the glass wall: for them  
Clerk, spy, nurse, killer, prince, the great and the defeated,  
Move in a mute day-dream.

Bathed in this common source, you gape incurious  
At what your active hours have willed –  
Sleep-walking on that silver wall, the furious  
Sick shapes and pregnant fancies of your world.

There is the mayor opening the oyster season:  
A society wedding: the autumn hats look swell:  
An old crocks' race, and a politician  
In fishing-waders to prove that all is well.

Oh, look at the warplanes! Screaming hysteric treble  
In the long power-dive, like gannets they fall steep.  
But what are they to trouble –  
These silver shadows to trouble your watery, womb-deep  
sleep?

See the big guns, rising, groping, erected  
To plant death in your world's soft womb.  
Fire-bud, smoke-blossom, iron seed projected –  
Are these exotics? They will grow nearer home:

Grow nearer home – and out of the dream-house stumbling  
One night into a strangling air and the flung  
Rags of children and thunder of stone niagaras tumbling,  
You'll know you slept too long.

# Regency Houses

In the abandoned heaven  
Light shrinks like pools on sand –  
One in a million days  
That dying where they stand  
Image our last and leave an  
Adored light behind.  
Autumn is soon. We gaze  
At a Regency terrace, curved  
Like the ritual smile, resigned  
And formidable, that's carved  
On the stone face of the dead.  
Shallow a breath divides us  
From the formal-smiling dead.  
Light leaves this shore, these shells,  
The windows glazed in death,  
And soon on us beneath  
A first leaf falls,  
And then the next night hides us.

We who in younger days,  
Hoping too much, tried on  
The habit of perfection,  
Have learnt how it betrays  
Our shrinking flesh: we have seen  
The praised transparent will  
Living now by reflection.  
The panes darken: but still  
We have seen peering out  
The mad, too mobile face  
Under the floral hat.

Are we living – we too,  
Living extravagant farce  
In the finery of spent passions?  
Is all we do and shall do  
But the glib, habitual breathing  
Of clocks where time means nothing,  
In a condemned mansion?

# Landscapes

## 1

This autumn park, the sequin glitter of leaves  
Upon its withering bosom, the lake a moonstone –  
O light mellifluous, glossing the stone-blind mansion,  
October light, a godsend to these groves!

These unkempt groves, blind vistas, mark the defeat  
Of men who imposed on Nature a private elegance  
And died of dropsy. Let still the gay ghosts dance,  
They are heartless ones we should wish nor fear to meet.

A ruin now, but here the Folly grinned –  
The mad memento that one joker built:  
Mocking their reasoned crops, a fabulous guilt  
Towered up and cursed them fruitless from the ground.

Light drops, the hush of fallen ash, submission  
Of a dying face now muted for the grave:  
Through mansion, lake and the lacklustre groves  
We see the landscape of their dissolution.

## 2

A landscape, now, with no remorse  
Or symmetry, hacked out by those  
Whom versatile history later chose –  
Her ugliest, cash Conquistadors.

An inflamed sky reflects the wrath  
Of babes from whom they hid the sun:  
Disease and slag-tip smoulder on  
With rancour round their narrowing path.



Towns there are choked with desperate men,  
Scrap-iron gluts the sidings here:  
Iron and men they mould for war,  
But in their death that war will end.

From the gashed hills of desolation  
Our life-blood springs to liberty,  
And in the callous eyes we see  
The landscape of their dissolution.

# Sex-Crime

For one, the sudden fantastic grimace  
Above, the red clown's-grin ripping the chalk sad sky,  
Hailstones hatched out of midsummer, a face  
Blanched with love's vile reversal.

The spirit died

First – such blank amazement took away its breath,  
And let the body cry  
Through the short scuffle and infamy of death.  
For the other, who knows what nice proportion of loathing  
And lust conjured the deep devil, created  
That chance of incandescence? Figures here prove nothing.  
One step took him through the roaring waterfall  
That closed like a bead-curtain, left him alone with the  
    writhing  
Of what he loved or hated.  
His hands leapt out: they took vengeance for all  
Denials and soft answers. There was one who said  
Long since, 'rough play will end in tears'. There was Cain  
In the picture-book. Forgotten. Here is one dead,  
And one could never be whole again.

The news

Broke a Sunday inertia: ring after ring  
Across that smug mirror went echoing  
And fainting out to the dim margins of incredulity.  
A few raw souls accuse  
Themselves of this felony and find not guilty –  
Acquitted on a mere alibi or technical point.  
Most see it as an island eruption, viewed  
From the safe continent; not dreaming the same fire pent  
Within their clay that warps  
The night with fluent alarm, their own wrath spewed

Through the red craters of that undistinguished corpse.  
All that has reached them is the seismic thrill:  
The ornaments vibrate on the shelf; then they are still.  
Snugly we settle down  
Into our velvet and legitimate bed,  
While news-sheets are yet falling all over the town  
Like a white ash. Falling on one dead  
And one can never be whole again.

You watch him

Pulpited in the dock, preaching repentance  
While the two professionals in fancy dress  
Manœuvre formally to score off him or catch him.  
But grief has her conventions –  
The opaque mask of misery will confess  
Nothing, nor plead moving extenuations.  
But you who crowd the court-room, will you never be called  
To witness for the defence?

Accomplices,

All of you, now – though now is still too late –  
Bring on the missing evidence! Reveal the coiled  
Venom, the curse that needs  
Only a touch to be articulate.  
You, Judge, strip off! Show us the abscess boiling  
Beneath your scarlet. Oh point, someone, to where it  
spreads  
On every hand – the red, collusive stain . . .  
All too well you have done your work: for one is dead,  
And the other will not be whole again.

# The Bells that Signed

The bells that signed a conqueror in  
Or franked the lovers' bed, now mean  
Nothing more heavenly than their  
Own impulse and recoil of air.

But still at eve, when the wind swells  
Out of the west, those rocking bells  
Buoy up the sunken light, or mark  
What rots unfathomed in the dark.

Broods the stone-lipped conqueror still  
Abject upon his iron hill,  
And lovers in the naked beds  
Cry for more than maidenheads.

## A Happy View

... So take a happy view –  
This lawn graced with the candle-flames of crocus,  
Frail-handed girls under the flowering chestnut,  
Or anything will do  
That time takes back before it seems untrue:

And, if the truth were told,  
You'd count it luck, perceiving in what shallow  
Crevices and few crumbling grains of comfort  
Man's joy will seed, his cold  
And hardy fingers find an eagle's hold.

# Overtures to Death

## 1

For us, born into a world  
Of fledged, instinctive trees,  
Of lengthening days, snowfall at Christmas  
And sentried palaces,

You were the one our parents  
Could not forget or forgive –  
A remittance man, a very very  
Distant relative.

We read your name in the family  
Bible. It was tabu  
At meals and lessons, but in church sometimes  
They seemed to be praying for you.

You lived overseas, we gathered:  
And often lying safe  
In bed we thought of you, hearing the indrawn  
Breath of the outcast surf.

Later we heard them saying  
You had done well in the War.  
And, though you never came home to us,  
We saw your name everywhere.

When home grew unsympathetic,  
You were all the rage for a while –  
The favourite uncle with the blank-cheque-book  
And the understanding smile.

Some of us went to look for you  
In aeroplanes and fast cars:  
Some tried the hospitals, some took to vice,  
Others consulted the stars.

But now, sir, that you may be going  
To visit us any night,  
We watch the french windows, picturing you  
In rather a different light.

The house, we perceive, is shabby,  
There's dry-rot in the wood:  
It's a poor welcome and it won't keep you out  
And we wish we had been good.

But there's no time now for spring-cleaning  
Or mending the broken lock.  
We are here in the shrouded drawing-room till  
Your first, your final knock.

2

When all the sky is skimming  
And lovers frisk in the hay,  
When it's easy forgiving the dead or the living,  
He is not so far away.

When love's hands are too hot, too cold,  
And justice turns a deaf ear,  
When springs congeal and the skies are sealed,  
We know that he is near.

Now here was a property, on all sides  
Considered quite imposing:  
Take a good look round at house and grounds –  
The mortgage is foreclosing.

Now Death he is the bailiff  
And he sits in our best room  
Appraising chintz and ornaments  
And the child in the womb.

We were not shyesters or loonies,  
Our spirit was up to proof:  
Simpler far is the reason for our  
Notice to quit this roof.

We paid for our lease and rule of life  
In hard cash; and one day  
The news got through to you-know-who  
That we'd ceased to pay our way.

Oh what will happen to our dear sons,  
Our dreams of pensioned ease? •  
They are downed and shredded, for the wind  
we dreaded  
Worries the blossom trees.

Oh Death he is the bailiff  
And his men wait outside:  
We shall sleep well in our handsome shell  
While he auctions away our pride.

3

Sir, I'd not make so bold as to lack all  
Respect for one whose prowess in the bed and the battlefield  
Have excited (and justly) universal comment.  
Nor could I, if I wished –  
Who, in the small hours and the talkative  
Reception, have felt you ticking within my belly –  
Pretend there's any worse ordeal to come.  
You and I, my friend, are antagonists  
And the fight's framed: for this I blame not you  
But the absentee promoter. If I seem to treat  
Your titles, stamina, skill with levity,  
Call it the rat's bad-loser snarl, the madman  
Humouring the two doctors, the point declaring  
War on the calm circumference. . . .



You have appeared to us in many guises –  
Pale priest, black camel, the bemedalled sergeant  
Of general conscription, a bugbear to affright  
Second childhood, or the curtain drawn so deftly  
To show that diamond-tiered tree  
Evergreen with bliss for all good boys and girls.  
You have been called the Leveller: but little  
That meant to the aristos you transferred  
Straight from one rotten borough to another;  
Nor can our state, hollow and cold as theirs,  
Much envy the drab democrats of the grave.  
Happiest, in our nervous time, who name you  
Peace. You are the peace that millions die for.

If there's a moment's solace, laid like the bloom  
Of dew upon our meadows; if honeysuckle  
Clings to its sweetened hour, and the appealing  
Beauty of flesh makes time falter in his stride;  
If anywhere love-lips, flower-flaunt, crimson of cloud-  
crest

With flames impassioned hold off the pacing shadows –  
You can rest indulgent: soon enough  
They shall be all, all of your complexion.

I grant you the last word. But what of these –  
The criminal agents of a dying will  
Who, frantic with defeat, conspire to force your  
Earlier intervention?

It is they, your damned auxiliaries, must answer  
For the self-slain in the foodless, fireless room,  
For stunted hearts that droop by our olive-green  
Canals, the blossom of children untimely shattered  
By their crazed, random fire, and the fear like a black  
frost

Foreshortening our prospect, metallic on our tongues.  
If I am too familiar with you, sir,  
It is that these have brought you into contempt.  
You are in nature. These are most unnatural.

We shall desire your peace in our own time:  
But with those, your free-lance and officious  
Our war is life itself and shall not fail. gunmen;

## 4

Forgive us, that we ever thought  
You could with innocence be bought,  
Or, puffed with queasy power, have tried  
Your register to override.

Such diamond-faced and equal laws  
 Allow no chink or saving clause:  
 Besotted may-fly, bobbish wren  
 Count in your books as much as men.

No North-West Passage can be found  
To sail those freezing capes around,  
Nor no smooth by-pass ever laid  
Shall that metropolis evade.

The tampering hand, the jealous eye  
That overlooked our infancy –  
Forgiven soon, they sank their trust  
And our reproach into the dust.

We also, whom a bawdy spring  
Tempted to order everything,  
Shall shrink beneath your first caress  
Into a modest nothingness.

The meshes of the imperious blood,  
The wind-flown tower, the poet's word  
Can catch no more than a weak sigh  
And ghost of immortality.

O lord of leisure, since we know  
Your image we shall ne'er outgrow,  
Teach us the value of our stay  
Lest we insult the living clay.

This clay that binds the roots of man  
And firmly foots his flying span –  
Only this clay can voice, invest,  
Measure and frame our mortal best.

O lord of night, bid us beware  
The wistful ghost that speaks us fair:  
Once let him in – he clots the veins  
And makes a still-birth of our pains.

Now we at last have crossed the line  
Where earth's exuberant fields begin,  
That green illusion in the sky  
Born of our desert years can die.

No longer let predestined need  
Cramp our design, or hunger breed  
Its windy dreams, or life distil  
Rare personal good from common ill.

Lord of us all, now it is true  
That we are lords of all but you,  
Teach us the order of our day  
Lest we deface the honoured clay.

5

The sun came out in April,  
The hawthorn in May:  
We thought the year, like other years,  
Would go the Christmas way.

In June we picked the clover,  
And sea-shells in July:  
There was no silence at the door,  
No word from the sky.

A hand came out of August  
And flicked his life away:  
We had not time to bargain, mope,  
Moralize, or pray.

Where he had been, was only  
An effigy on a bed  
To ask us searching questions or  
Hear what we'd left unsaid.

Only that stained parchment  
Set out what he had been –  
A face we might have learned better,  
But now must read unseen.

Thus he resigned his interest  
And claims, all in a breath,  
Leaving us the long office work  
And winding-up of death:

The ordinary anguish,  
The stairs, the awkward turn,  
The bearers' hats like black mushrooms  
Placed upon the lawn.

As a migrant remembers  
The sting and warmth of home,  
As the fruit bears out the blossom's word,  
We remember him.

He loved the sun in April,  
The hawthorn in May:  
Our tree will not light up for him  
Another Christmas Day.

It is not you I fear, but the humiliations  
 You mercifully use to deaden grief –  
 The downward graph of natural joys,  
 Imagination's slump, the blunted ear.

I hate this cold and politic self-defence  
 Of hardening arteries and nerves  
 Grown dull with time-serving. I see that the heart lives  
 By self-betrayal, by circumspection is killed.

That boy, whose glance makes heaven open and edges  
 Each dawning pain with gold, must learn to disbelieve:  
 The wildfire lust of the eyes will gutter down  
 To age's dim recalcitrance.

Have we not seen how quick this young girl's thoughts,  
 Wayward and burning as a charm of goldfinches  
 Alarmed from thistle-tops, turn into  
 Spite or a cupboard love or clipped routine?

Nearing the watershed and the difficult passes,  
 Man wraps up closer against the chill  
 In his familiar habits; and at the top  
 Pauses, seeing your kingdom like a net beneath him spread.

Some climbed to this momentous peak of the world  
 And facing the horizon – that notorious pure woman  
 Who lures to cheat the last embrace,  
 Hurled themselves down upon an easier doom.

One the rare air made dizzy renounced  
 Earth, and the avalanche took him at his word:  
 One wooed perfection – he's bedded deep in the glacier,  
perfect  
 And null, the prince and image of despair.

The best, neither hoarding nor squandering  
The radiant flesh and the receptive  
Spirit, stepped on together in the rhythm of comrades who  
Have found a route on earth's true reckoning based.

They have not known the false humility,  
The shamming-dead of the senses beneath your hunter's  
hand;  
But life's green standards they've advanced  
To the limit of your salt unyielding zone.

7

For us, born into a still  
Unsweetened world, of sparse  
Breathing-room, alleys brackish as hell's pit  
And heaven-accusing spires,

You were never far nor fable,  
Judgement nor happy end:  
We have come to think of you, mister, as  
Almost the family friend.

Our kiddies play tag with you often  
Among the tornado wheels;  
Through fevered nights you sit up with them,  
You serve their little meals.

You lean with us at street-corners,  
We have met you in the mine;  
Your eyes are the foundry's glare, you beckon  
From the snake-tooth, sly machine.

Low in the flooded engineroom,  
High on the yawing steeple –  
Wherever we are, we begin to fancy  
That we're your chosen people.

They came to us with charity,  
They came to us with whips,  
They came with chains behind their back  
And freedom on their lips:

Castle and field and city –  
Ours is a noble land,  
Let us work for its fame together, they said;  
But we don't quite understand.

For they took the land and the credit,  
Took virtue and double-crossed her;  
They left us the scrag-end of the luck  
And the brunt of their disaster.

And now like horses they fidget  
Smelling death in the air:  
But we are your chosen people, and  
We've little to lose or fear.

When the time comes for a clearance,  
When light brims over the hill,  
Mister, you can rely on us  
To execute your will.

# When They Have Lost

When they have lost the little that they looked for,  
The poor allotment of ease, custom, fame:  
When the consuming star their fathers worked for  
Has guttered into death, a fatuous flame:  
When love's a cripple, faith a bed-time story,  
Hope eats her heart out and peace walks on knives,  
And suffering men cry an end to this sorry  
World of whose children want alone still thrives:  
Then shall the mounting stages of oppression  
Like mazed and makeshift scaffolding torn down  
Reveal his unexampled, best creation –  
The shape of man's necessity full-grown.  
Built from their bone, I see a power-house stand  
To warm men's hearts again and light the land.



# In the Heart of Contemplation

In the heart of contemplation –  
Admiring, say, the frost-flowers of the white lilac,  
Or lark's song busily sifting like sand-crystals  
Through the pleased hourglass an afternoon of summer,  
Or your beauty, dearer to me than these –  
Discreetly a whisper in the ear,  
The glance of one passing my window recall me  
From lark, lilac, you, grown suddenly strangers.

In the plump and pastoral valley  
Of a leisure time, among the trees like seabirds  
Asleep on a glass calm, one shadow moves –  
The sly reminder of the forgotten appointment.  
All the shining pleasures, born to be innocent,  
Grow dark with a truant's guilt:  
The day's high heart falls flat, the oaks tremble,  
And the shadow sliding over your face divides us.

In the act of decision only,  
In the hearts cleared for action like lovers naked  
For love, this shadow vanishes: there alone  
There is nothing between our lives for it to thrive on.  
You and I with lilac, lark and oak-leaved  
Valley are bound together  
As in the astounded clarity before death.  
Nothing is innocent now but to act for life's sake.

# Sonnet for a Political Worker

Is this what wears you out – having to weigh  
One mote against another, the time spent  
Fitting each thumbed and jig-saw argument  
Into a pattern clear to you as day?  
Boredom, the dull repetitive delay,  
Opponents' tricky call, the discontent  
Of friends, seem to deny what history meant  
When first she showed her hand for you to play.

Do you not see that history's high tension  
Must so be broken down to each man's need  
And his frail filaments, that it may feed  
Not blast all patience, love and warm invention?  
On lines beyond your single comprehension  
The circuit and full day of power proceed.

# Questions

How long will you keep this pose of self-confessed  
And aspen hesitation  
Dithering on the brink, obsessed  
Immobilized by the feminine fascination  
Of an image all your own,  
Or doubting which is shadow, which is bone?

Will you wait womanish, while the flattering stream  
Glosses your faults away?  
Or would you find within that dream  
Courage to break the dream, wisdom to say  
That wisdom is not there?  
Or is it simply the first shock you fear?

Do you need the horn in your ear, the hounds at your heel,  
Gadflies to sting you sore,  
The lightning's angry feint, and all  
The horizon clouds boiling like lead, before  
You'll risk your javelin dive  
And pierce reflection's heart, and come alive?

# The Volunteer

Tell them in England, if they ask  
What brought us to these wars,  
To this plateau beneath the night's  
Grave manifold of stars —

It was not fraud or foolishness,  
Glory, revenge, or pay:  
We came because our open eyes  
Could see no other way.

There was no other way to keep  
Man's flickering truth alight:  
These stars will witness that our course  
Burned briefer, not less bright.

Beyond the wasted olive-groves,  
The furthest lift of land,  
There calls a country that was ours  
And here shall be regained.

Shine to us, memoried and real,  
Green-water-silken meads:  
Rivers of home, refresh our path  
Whom here your influence leads.

Here in a parched and stranger place  
We fight for England free,  
The good our fathers won for her,  
The land they hoped to see.

# The Nabara<sup>1</sup>

*‘They preferred, because of the rudeness of their heart, to die rather than to surrender.’*

## PHASE ONE

Freedom is more than a word, more than the base coinage  
Of statesmen, the tyrant's dishonoured cheque, or the  
  dreamer's mad  
Inflated currency. She is mortal, we know, and made  
In the image of simple men who have no taste for carnage  
But sooner kill and are killed than see that image betrayed.  
Mortal she is, yet rising always refreshed from her ashes:  
She is bound to earth, yet she flies as high as a passage bird  
To home wherever man's heart with seasonal warmth is  
  stirred:  
Innocent is her touch as the dawn's, but still it unleashes  
The ravisher shades of envy. Freedom is more than a word.

I see man's heart two-edged, keen both for death and creation.  
As a sculptor rejoices, stabbing and mutilating the stone  
Into a shapelier life, and the two joys make one –  
So man is wrought in his hour of agony and elation  
To efface the flesh to reveal the crying need of his bone.  
Burning the issue was beyond their mild forecasting  
For those I tell of – men used to the tolerable joy and hurt  
Of simple lives: they coveted never an epic part;  
But history's hand was upon them and hewed an everlasting  
Image of freedom out of their rude and stubborn heart.

The year, Nineteen-thirty-seven: month, March: the men,  
descendants
Of those Iberian fathers, the inquiring ones who would go

<sup>1</sup> The episode upon which this poem is based is related in G. L. Steer's *The Tree of Gernika*.

Wherever the sea-ways led: a pacific people, slow  
To feel ambition, loving their laws and their independence –  
Men of the Basque country, the Mar Cantabrico. . .  
Fishermen, with no guile outside their craft, they had

weathered

Often the sierra-ranked Biscayan surges, the wet  
Fog of the Newfoundland Banks: they were fond of *pelota*:  
they met

No game beyond their skill as they swept the sea together,  
Until the morning they found the leviathan in their net.

Government trawlers *Nabara*, *Guipuzkoa*, *Bizkaya*,  
*Donostia*, escorting across blockaded seas  
*Galdames* with her cargo of nickel and refugees  
 From Bayonne to Bilbao, while the crest of war curled higher  
 Inland over the glacial valleys, the ancient ease.

On the morning of March the fifth, a chill North-Wester  
fanned them,  
Fogging the glassy waves: what uncharted doom lay low  
There in the fog athwart their course, they could not know:  
Stout were the armed trawlers, redoubtable those who  
manned them—

Men of the Basque country, the Mar Cantabrico.

Slowly they nosed ahead, while under the chill North-Wester  
Nervous the sea crawled and twitched like the skin of a beast  
That dreams of the chase, the kill, the blood-beslavered feast:  
They too, the light-hearted sailors, dreamed of a fine fiesta,  
Flags and their children waving, when they won home  
from the east.

Vague as images seen in a misted glass or the vision  
Of crystal-gazer, the ships huddled, receded, neared,  
Threading the weird fog-maze that coiled their funnels and  
bleared

Day's eye. They were glad of the fog till *Galdames* lost  
position  
– Their convoy, precious in life and metal – and disappeared.

But still they held their course, the confident ear-ringed  
captains,  
Unerring towards the landfall, nor guessed how the land lay,  
How the guardian fog was a guide to lead them all astray.  
For now, at a wink, the mist rolled up like the film that  
curtains

A saurian's eye; and into the glare of an evil day  
*Bizkaya*, *Guipuzkoa*, *Nabara*, and the little  
*Donostia* stepped at intervals; and sighted, alas,  
Blocking the sea and sky a mountain they might not pass,  
An isle thrown up volcanic and smoking, a giant in metal  
Astride their path – the rebel cruiser, *Canarias*.

A ship of ten thousand tons she was, a heavyweight fighter  
To the cocky bantam trawlers: and under her armament  
Of eight- and four-inch guns there followed obedient  
Towards *Pasajes* a prize just seized, an Estonian freighter  
Laden with arms the exporters of death to Spain had sent.  
A hush, the first qualm of conflict, falls on the cruiser's  
burnished

Turrets, the trawlers' grimy decks: fiercer the lime-  
Light falls, and out of the solemn ring the late mists climb,  
And ship to ship the antagonists gaze at each other astonished  
Across the quaking gulf of the sea for a moment's time.

The trawlers' men had no chance or wish to elude the fated  
Encounter. Freedom to these was natural pride that runs  
Hot as the blood, their climate and heritage, dearer than sons.  
*Bizkaya*, *Guipuzkoa*, knowing themselves outweighed,

Drew closer to draw first blood with their pairs of four-inch  
guns.

Aboard *Canarias* the German gun-layers stationed  
Brisk at their intricate batteries – guns and men both trained  
To a hair in accuracy, aimed at a pitiless end –  
Fired, and the smoke rolled forth over the unimpassioned  
Face of a day where nothing certain but death remained.

## P H A S E   T W O

The sound of the first salvo skimmed the ocean and thumped  
Cape Machichaco's granite ribs: it rebounded where  
The salt-sprayed trees grow tough from wrestling the wind:  
it jumped

From isle to rocky isle: it was heard by women while  
They walked to shrine or market, a warning they must fear.  
But, beyond their alarm, as

Though that sound were also a signal for fate to strip  
Luck's last green shoot from the falling stock of the Basquès,  
*Galdames*

Emerged out of the mist that lingered to the west  
Under the reeking muzzles of the rebel battleship:

Which instantly threw five shells over her funnel, and threw  
Her hundred women and children into a slaughter-yard

On the deck they imagined smoking with worse than the  
panic  
foggy dew,

So that *Galdames* rolled as they slipped, clawed, trampled,  
reeled

Away from the gape of the cruiser's guns. A spasm galvanic,  
Fear's chemistry, shocked the women's bodies, a moment  
before

Huddled like sheep in a mist, inert as bales of rag,





The Estonian. 'Follow me to harbour.' 'Cannot,' am  
 threatened.  
*Bizkaya's* last word – 'Turn at once!' – and she points her  
 peremptory guns  
 Against the freighter's mountainous flanks that blankly  
 hide  
 This fluttering language and flaunt of signal insolence  
 From the eyes of *Canarias*. At last the rebels can see  
 That the two ships' talk meant a practical joke at their  
 expense:  
 They see the Estonian veering away, to Bermeo steering,  
*Bizkaya* under her lee.

(To the Basques that ship was a tonic, for she carried some  
 million rounds  
 Of ammunition: to hearts grown sick with hope deferred  
 And the drain of their country's wounds  
 She brought what most they needed in face of the aid  
 evaded  
 And the cold delay of those to whom freedom was only a  
 word.)<sup>1</sup>  
 Owlsh upon the water sat the *Canarias*  
 Mobbed by those darting trawlers, and her signals blinked  
 in vain  
 After the freighter, that still she believed too large to pass  
 Into Bermeo's port – a prize she fondly thought,  
 When she'd blown the trawlers out of the water, she'd take  
 again.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Byron's comments upon 'Non-Intervention' in *The Age of Bronze*:

Lone, lost, abandoned in their utmost need  
 By Christians, unto whom they gave their creed,  
 The desolated lands, the ravaged isle,  
 The fostered feud encouraged to beguile,  
 The aid evaded, and the cold delay  
 Prolonged but in the hope to make a prey:—  
 These, these shall tell the tale, and Greece can show  
 The false friend worse than the infuriate foe.

Brisk at their intricate batteries the German gun-layers go  
About death's business, knowing their longer reach must foil  
The impetus, break the heart of the government ships: each  
blow

Deliberately they aim, and tiger-striped with flame  
Is the jungle mirk of the smoke as their guns leap and recoil.  
The Newfoundland trawlers feel

A hail and hurricane the like they have never known  
In all their deep-sea life: they wince at the squalls of steel  
That burst on their open decks, rake them and leave them  
wrecks,

But still they fight on long into the sunless afternoon.

— Fought on, four guns against the best of the rebel navy,  
Until *Guipuzkoa's* crew could stanch the fires no more  
That gushed from her gashes and seeped nearer the maga-  
zine. Heavy

At heart they turned away for the Nervion that day:

Their ship, *Guipuzkoa*, wore

Flame's rose on her heart like a decoration of highest honour  
As listing she reeled into Las Arenas; and in a row

On her deck there lay, smoke-palled, that oriflamme's  
crackling banner

Above them, her dead — a quarter of the fishermen who  
had fought her —

Men of the Basque country, the Mar Cantabrico.

### PHASE THREE

And now the gallant *Nabara* was left in the ring alone,  
The sky hollow around her, the fawning sea at her side:  
But the ear-ringed crew in their berets stood to the guns,  
and cried

A fresh defiance down

The ebb of the afternoon, the battle's darkening tide.  
Honour was satisfied long since; they had held and harried  
A ship ten times their size; they well could have called it a day.  
But they hoped, if a little longer they kept the cruiser in play,  
*Galdames* with the wealth of life and metal she carried  
Might make her getaway.

*Canarias*, though easily she outpaced and out-gunned her,  
Finding this midge could sting  
Edged off, and beneath a wedge of smoke steamed in a ring  
On the rim of the trawler's range, a circular storm of thunder.  
But always *Nabara* turned her broadside, manœuvring  
To keep both guns on the target, scorning safety devices.  
Slower now battle's tempo, irregular the beat  
Of gunfire in the heart  
Of the afternoon, the distempered sky sank to the crisis,  
Shell-shocked the sea tossed and hissed in delirious heat.

The battle's tempo slowed, for the cruiser could take her time,  
And the guns of *Nabara* grew  
Red-hot, and of fifty-two Basque seamen had been her crew  
Many were dead already, the rest filthy with grime  
And their comrades' blood, weary with wounds all but a few.  
Between two fires they fought, for the sparks that flashing  
spoke  
From the cruiser's thunder-bulk were answered on their  
own craft  
By traitor flames that crawled out of every cranny and rift  
Blinding them all with smoke.  
At half-past four *Nabara* was burning fore and aft.

What buoyancy of will  
Was theirs to keep her afloat, no vessel now but a sieve –  
So jarred and scarred, the rivets starting, no inch of her safe

From the guns of the foe that wrapped her in a cyclone of  
  shrieking steel!  
Southward the sheltering havens showed clear, the cliffs and  
  the surf  
Familiar to them from childhood, the shapes of a life still  
  dear:  
But dearer still to see  
Those shores insured for life from the shadow of tyranny.  
Freedom was not on their lips; it was what made them  
  endure,  
A steel spring in the yielding flesh, a thirst to be free.

And now from the little *Donostia* that lay with her 75's  
Dumb in the offing, they saw *Nabara* painfully lower  
A boat, which crawled like a shattered crab slower and  
  slower  
Towards them. They cheered the survivors, thankful to  
  save these lives  
At least. They saw each rower,  
As the boat dragged alongside, was wounded – the oars they  
  held  
Dripping with blood, a bloody skein reeled out in their  
  wake:  
And they swarmed down the rope-ladders to rescue these  
  men so weak  
From wounds they must be hauled  
Aboard like babies. And then they saw they had made a  
  mistake.

For, standing up in the boat,  
A man of that grimy boat's-crew hailed them: 'Our officer asks  
You give us your bandages and all your water-casks,  
Then run for Bermeo. We're going to finish this game of  
*pelota.*'

*Donosia*'s captain begged them with tears to escape: but the  
Basques

Would play their game to the end.

They took the bandages, and cursing at his delay

They took the casks that might keep the fires on their ship  
at bay;

And they rowed back to *Nabara*, trailing their blood behind  
Over the water, the sunset and crimson ebb of their day.

For two hours more they fought, while *Nabara* beneath  
their feet

Was turned to a heap of smouldering scrap-iron. Once  
again

The flames they had checked a while broke out. When the  
forward gun

Was hit, they turned about

Bringing the after gun to bear. They fought in pain

And the instant knowledge of death: but the waters filling  
their riven

Ship could not quench the love that fired them. As each  
man fell

To the deck, his body took fire as if death made visible

That burning spirit. For two more hours they fought, and  
at seven

They fired their last shell.

Of her officers all but one were dead. Of her engineers

All but one were dead. Of the fifty-two that had sailed

In her, all were dead but fourteen – and each of these half  
killed

With wounds. And the night-dew fell in a hush of ashen tears,  
And *Nabara*'s tongue was stilled.

Southward the sheltering havens grew dark, the cliffs and  
the green

Shallows they knew; where their friends had watched them  
as evening wore

To a glowing end, who swore  
*Nabara* must show a white flag now, but saw instead the  
fourteen  
Climb into their matchwood boat and fainting pull for the  
shore.

*Canarias* lowered a launch that swept in a greyhound's  
curve

Pitiless to pursue  
And cut them off. But that bloodless and all-but-phantom  
crew

Still gave no soft concessions to fate: they strung their nerve  
For one last fling of defiance, they shipped their oars and  
threw  
Hand-grenades at the launch as it circled about to board  
them.

But the strength of the hands that had carved them a hold  
on history

Failed them at last: the grenades fell short of the enemy,  
Who grappled and overpowered them,  
While *Nabara* sank by the stern in the hushed Cantabrian  
sea.

\* \* \* \* \*

They bore not a charmed life. They went into battle fore-  
seeing

Probable loss, and they lost. The tides of Biscay flow  
Over the obstinate bones of many, the winds are sighing  
Round prison walls where the rest are doomed like their  
ship to rust –

Men of the Basque country, the Mar Cantabrico.

Simple men who asked of their life no mythical splendour,  
They loved its familiar ways so well that they preferred  
In the rudeness of their heart to die rather than to  
surrender . . .

Mortal these words and the deed they remember, but cast  
a seed  
Shall flower for an age when freedom is man's creative  
word.

Freedom was more than a word, more than the base coinage  
Of politicians who hiding behind the skirts of peace  
They had defiled, gave up that country to rack and

carnage:  
For whom, indelibly stamped with history's contempt,  
Remains but to haunt the blackened shell of their  
policies.

For these I have told of, freedom was flesh and blood – a  
mortal

Body, the gun-breech hot to its touch: yet the battle's height  
Raised it to love's meridian and held it awhile immortal;  
And its light through time still flashes like a star's that has

turned to ashes,  
Long after *Nabara's* passion was quenched in the sea's  
heart.



# Spring Song

Floods and the voluble winds  
Have warned the dead away:  
In swaying copse the willows  
Wave their magic wands.

The sun is here to deal  
With the dull decay we felt:  
In field and square he orders  
The vague shadows to heel.

The licence is renewed  
And all roads lead to summer:  
Good girls come to grief,  
Fish to the springy rod.

Our thoughts like sailplanes go  
To and fro sauntering  
Along fantastic cloud-streets  
On warmer currents' flow.

A larger appetite,  
A tautening of the will,  
The wild pony tamed,  
The common gorse alight.

Now the bee finds the pollen,  
The pale boy a cure:  
Who cares if in the sequel  
Cocky shall be crestfallen?

## Night Piece

Down the night-scented borders of sleep  
They walk hand in hand, the lovers  
Whom day abashed like the cross  
Eye of the rheumatic keeper.  
They are laid in the grass, and above  
Their limbs a syringa blossoms  
In brief and bridal white,  
Under whose arch of moonshine  
The impotent is made straight,  
The ice-queen delighted,  
And the virgin loves to moan,  
And the schoolboy finds the equator.

Here too the dark plays tricks  
On some of accredited glory.  
The chairman's forgot his speech:  
The general meets his victims,  
And the pale wounds weep once more:  
The archbishop is preaching  
Stark naked: standing alone  
Among his people, the dictator  
Glares round for a bodyguard.  
All the fears cold-shouldered at noonday  
Flock to these shades, and await  
In displeasure those who ignored them.

# The Three Cloud-Maidens

Says winding Trent  
Among the low pastures –  
In my crystal read  
Your real wish and features:  
May no accident  
Of flood or mist be flawing  
The chaste, prophetic reed,  
The child-face stream's flowing –  
Says winding Trent  
Among the low pastures.

Say the three cloud-maidens  
Over the soiled valley –  
To reproach you we rise  
Wind-flushed and early:  
The mist that maddens,  
The clumsy floods that hurt  
Innocence, all arise  
Out of your shallow heart –  
Say the three cloud-maidens  
Over the soiled valley.

## Behold The Swan

Behold the swan  
Riding at her image, anchored there  
Complacent, a water-lily upon  
The ornamental water:  
Queen of the mute October air,  
She broods in that unbroken  
Reverie of reed and water.

Now from the stricken  
Pool she hoists and flurries,  
And passes overhead  
In hoarse, expressive flight:  
Her wings bear hard  
On the vibrant air: unhurried  
The threat and pulse of wings, the throat  
Levelled towards the horizon, see –  
They are prophecy.

## Song

It was not far through the pinewoods  
That day to the lodge gate,  
But far enough for the wind to phrase  
My ten-year-long regret.

It was not far by the cornfield,  
The tall ears looked alive:  
But my heart, like corn, was broken for  
A harvest I could not have.

From husk of words unspoken  
I'll winnow a ripe seed:  
From woods where love was shy to trespass  
I'll learn the airs I need.

Oh here and unlamenting  
Her graceful ghost shall shine –  
In the heart mature as fruited fields,  
The singing words of pine.

# The Escapist

Before a rumour stirred, he fled the country  
Preferring blank disgrace to any gesture  
That could wipe out his failure with himself.  
A warmer man no doubt had realized  
His assets in our buoyant love, and taken  
Some bonds to gild an unromantic exile.

Before their first reproach could reach his ears,  
He had set up a private court, accepted  
Full responsibility, and passed judgement.  
The man whom later they reviled because  
He would not face their music, was already  
Self-flayed and branded in his heart for ever.

Before the story broke, he had sat down  
To write it out, determined that no vestige  
Of guilt be missed, no tiniest false inflection  
Of heroism creep in to justify  
The ugly tale. They said he was too proud to  
Trust other hands even with his dishonour.

Before you heap quick-lime upon that felon  
Memory, think how nothing you can do  
Could touch his self-vindictiveness, and nothing  
You did to cure the cowardice it avenged for.  
Say, if you like, escape was in his blood –  
Escape's as good a word as any other.

# Passage from Childhood

His earliest memory, the mood  
Fingered and frail as maidenhair,  
Was this – a china cup somewhere  
In a green, deep wood.  
He lives to find again somewhere  
That wood, that homely cup; to taste all  
Its chill, imagined dew; to dare  
The dangerous crystal.

Who can say what misfeatured elf  
First led him into that lifelong  
Passage of mirrors where, so young,  
He saw himself  
Balanced as Blondin, more headstrong  
Than baby Hercules, rare as a one-  
Cent British Guiana, above the wrong  
And common run?

He knew the secrecy of squirrels,  
The foolish doves' antiphony,  
And what wrens fear. He was gun-shy,  
Hating all quarrels.  
Life was a hostile land to spy,  
Full of questions he dared not ask  
Lest the answer in mockery  
Or worse unmask.

Quick to injustice, quick he grew  
This hermit and contorted shell.  
Self-pity like a thin rain fell,  
Fouling the view:  
Then tree-trunks seemed wet roots of hell,  
Wren or catkin might turn vicious,  
The dandelion clock could tell  
Nothing auspicious.

No exile has ever looked so glum  
With the pines fretful overhead,  
Yet he felt at home in the gothic glade –  
More than at home.  
You will forgive him that he played  
Bumble-puppy on the small mossed lawn  
All by himself for hours, afraid  
Of being born.

Lying awake one night, he saw  
Eternity stretched like a howl of pain:  
He was tiny and terrible, a new pin  
On a glacier's floor.  
Very few they are who have lain  
With eternity and lived to tell it:  
There's a secret process in his brain  
And he cannot sell it.

Now, beyond reach of sense or reason,  
His life walks in a glacial sleep  
For ever, since he drank that cup  
And found it poison.  
He's one more ghost, engaged to keep  
Eternity's long hours and mewed  
Up in live flesh with no escape  
From solitude.



# Self-Criticism and Answer

It was always so, always –  
My too meticulous words  
Mocked by the unhinged cries  
Of playground, mouse or gull,  
By throats of nestling birds  
Like bells upturned in a peal –  
All that has innocence  
To praise and far to fall.

I fear this careful art  
Would never storm the sense:  
Its agonies are but the eager  
Retching of an empty heart;  
It never was possessed  
By divine incontinence,  
And for him whom that eygre  
Sweeps not, silence were best.

\* \* \* \* \*

Your politicians pray silence  
For the ribald trumpeter,  
The falsetto crook, the twitching  
Unappeasable dictator.  
For any else you should be pleased  
To hold your tongue: but Satan  
Himself would disown his teaching  
And turn to spit on these.

When madmen play the piper  
And knaves call the tune,  
Honesty's a right passion –  
She must call to her own.  
Let yours be the start and stir  
Of a flooding indignation  
That channels the dry heart deeper  
And sings through the dry bone.